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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000213

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2027
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: HARIRI CALLS BERRI; EXPLORATORY COMMITTEE TO BE
FORMED

REF: A. BEIRUT 204

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 197

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for reason 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) As a follow up to what Saudi Ambassador Khoja described as a "Berri initiative" earlier in the day (reftel), MP Saad Hariri, still in Riyadh, called Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri on Wednesday evening (2/7), in the first direct communication between Hariri and Berri since November.

The two decided to form a committee to examine whether both March 14 and March 8 forces can agree on using Berri's ideas for a way forward. Hariri immediately deployed his close advisor Ghattas Khoury back to Beirut via Hariri's private jet in order to start the committee. Khoury told us that he expects to meet Berri's committee members either late today (2/8) or tomorrow. Khoury also shared with us the written comments by March 14 leaders on Berri's initiative (which we have translated loosely into English). We will see Khoury after his initial meeting with the new committee. Given prevailing tensions, March 14 figures Walid Jumblatt and Marwan Hamadeh welcomed the decision to form the committee. At the same time, they predicted that it would soon become obvious that Berri's real intention is to prolong and deepen the stalemate, in order to provoke the increasingly disgusted Lebanese population into pressuring March 14 for a compromise in March 8's favor. The Saudis now seem to have stepped back from active diplomacy, which Jumblatt believed is a good thing, and our Lebanese contacts do not expect to see Amr Moussa here soon. End summary.

SAAD CALLS NABIH

[1](#)2. (C) As the Ambassador was meeting in the evening of 2/7 with Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and Minister of Communications Marwan Hamadeh in Jumblatt's Mukhtara home, MP Saad Hariri (still outside of Lebanon) phoned Jumblatt. Hariri reported that he had just spoken with Parliament Speaker Berri. Believing (erroneously) that a fax was more secure than a phone call, Hariri said that Jumblatt would get written details soon. The subsequent fax (which Jumblatt read to us but did not provide a copy) indicated that the phone call was cordial but brief. In discussing Berri's ideas for moving ahead (outlined in Ref A), Berri told Hariri that he was no longer worried about Syrian pressure. He

would decide based on what is best for Lebanon. "Berri now says he's his own man!" Jumblatt read to Hamadeh, leading both to giggle. It was time for the Lebanese to talk to each other and come up with their own solutions. There is no choice but to work for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Berri offered to make an announcement that he and Hariri both accepted Berri's outlines as the best way to move forward.

COMMITTEE TO STUDY PACKAGE

13. (C) Hariri proposed that he and Berri set up a committee to discuss the proposed initiative -- not just the tribunal -- in more detail. On the condition that the committee gets started quickly, Berri agreed. Hariri nominated former MP Ghattas Khoury and Dr. Mohamed Sammak (who has worked extensively on inter-faith dialogue issues); Berri nominated MP Ali Hassan Khalil and promised to get another member from Hizballah. Berri reminded Hariri that, in the national dialogue session on 11/9, Hariri had already "agreed" to a 19-11 cabinet split in exchange for the tribunal approval. ("Same old story," Jumblatt said to Hamadeh, as an aside.) Khoury, who returned from Saudi Arabia late on 2/7 on one of Hariri's private jets to jump-start the committee, told the Ambassador on 2/8 that he believes the committee will begin work later today (2/8) or tomorrow. It is, he emphasized, just an exploratory committee to see whether the two sides agree to work on the basis of Berri's initiative.

JUMBLATT AND HAMADEH POSITIVELY INCLINED
(BUT DO NOT EXPECT RESULTS)

14. (C) After re-reading the Hariri-Berri telephone

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transcript a couple of times, Jumblatt and Hariri discussed the merits of the exploratory committee Hariri proposed and Berri accepted. Expressing confidence in Ghattas Khoury, they pronounced themselves satisfied: it is better to talk than not to talk. Although a modest step, the establishment of the committee can help ease tensions. At the same time, Jumblatt predicted that it will soon be apparent that Berri wants "process, not progress." Berri's aim is to delay any real forward movement, perpetuate the current stalemate, and hope that the increasingly disgusted Lebanese population will become so desperate for a solution that they pressure the GOL and March 14 into surrendering to March 8 demands (but of course not to any demand, such as earlier parliamentary elections, that would threaten Berri's position as speaker). Syria, Iran, and Hizballah recognize that they can't push ahead with street action, for that will lead to civil war; nor can they move back down, for that will cause them to lose credibility. So the March 8 forces have changed their tactics entirely in order to perpetuate the immobilization of the GOL and deterioration of the economic and financial climate, until the point where the GOL simply gives up.

SAUDIS RECEDING FROM ACTIVE DIPLOMACY;
NO SIGN OF AMR MOUSSA'S ARRIVAL

15. (C) Jumblatt and Hamadeh also expressed satisfaction that Saudi Arabia seems to be backing away from the direct, active diplomacy with Iran of the past few weeks. They noted that both March 8 and March 14 had hoped that Saudi Arabia would pressure the other side: Berri and his allies counted on Saudi Arabia pressuring the March 14 leaders into concessions. March 14 leaders hoped Saudi Arabia would get Iran to pressure Syria and Hizballah into backing down. As this clearly wasn't working, it's better for Saudi Arabia to play a more discreet supporting role, Jumblatt argued. Hamadeh and Jumblatt also expressed the view that Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa would not soon be returning to

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Beirut.

MARCH 14 PAPER -- EMBASSY TRANSLATION

16. (C) From Khoury, the Embassy has received a copy of the document that Hariri provided to Berri, giving the March 14 comments on Berri's initiative and how March 14 would package the ideas. The Embassy's informal translation follows.

Begin text:

Proposal

- o Announce the formation of a working group to study the draft law of the international tribunal with a deadline of maximum five days to complete its work;

- o Start discussions on expanding the current cabinet to 30 ministers under the formula presented by the Arab League Secretary General, and which received domestic, Arab and

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international support, i.e., 19-10-1. Nineteen (19) for the majority, ten (10) for Amal, Hizballah and the Reform and Change (Aoun) bloc, and one (1) neutral.

- o An agreement shall be reached on a clear and specific mechanism to select the eleventh minister that will guarantee his neutrality.

- o The Speaker of Parliament shall make a public announcement including the following elements:

Approval of the remarks made by the working group on the Special Tribunal;

Adoption of the formation of the new cabinet;

End of the sit-in and withdrawal of protesters from the streets

A commitment on behalf of all parties represented in the cabinet that

- No party will resign from the cabinet or obstruct the cabinet by preventing a quorum;
- Parliament will open in an extraordinary session;
- The decrees expanding the cabinet will be issued;

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- The cabinet will convene immediately after the decree is issued in order to approve the Special Tribunal;

- The President of the Republic will sign the tribunal decree on the same day as its issuance by the cabinet;

- The tribunal decree will be referred immediately to the Parliament;

- The Parliament will meet immediately to approve the tribunal draft law;

- All parties will commit themselves to facilitate all steps required to form the Special Tribunal, to delegate the Lebanese members thereof, and then help in launching and facilitating its work.

Observation:

- o If the other party still insists on forming a 19-11 (rather than 19-10-1) cabinet, then in order to help solve the problem, there will be no objection (from March 14) on the condition that this party (i.e., Berri) shall provide a written commitment that the cabinet shall be expanded according to the terms reported in the draft agreement, i.e., on the basis of (19-10-1) and in accordance with the mechanism in selecting the eleventh minister. (We asked Khoury about this "observation," which is as confusing in the original Arabic as it is in our rough translation. Khoury said that what it means is that the March 14 majority will

permit Berri to describe the cabinet split as 19-11, as long as he provides a written guarantee that it actually operates in accordance with the 19-10-1 understanding, with the 11th minister picked accordingly.)

End text.

FELTMAN